

Believing in Others

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Now, when a man has been underestimated by a friend, he has some cause for taking offense – since it is our friends who should *overestimate* our capacities. They should have an exaggerated opinion of our moral fortitude, our aesthetic sensibilities, and our intellectual scope. Why, they should practically imagine us leaping through a window in the nick of time with the works of Shakespeare in one hand and a pistol in the other!

– Amor Towles, *A Gentleman in Moscow*

People sometimes do not achieve their goals or live up to their commitments. This remark is not meant to be as cynical as it might sound. Often, we simply change our minds about what to strive for, or exit one commitment in order to take up another. This might be the result of one's view about what is worth doing in life evolving over time. Most of us never achieved our childhood goals of being firefighters or astronauts, but this is simply because these goals were replaced by others that came to be seen as more appealing. In other cases, we discover that our abilities, opportunities, or capacity for self-discipline are just not well-suited for our aspirations of novel-writing or marathon-running. This need not mean that it was a mistake to adopt the end in the first place, although it might have been; it is often unclear at the outset what the likelihood of success in some endeavor is, and so perhaps reasonable to try. The point is simply that we sometimes do not end up doing what we set out to do, especially when our goals are lofty.

Given this, suppose a person – call them 'A' – adopts a goal, say, to finish a doctoral dissertation that their Ph.D. committee will accept as passable. What should you believe about whether A will succeed? The seemingly obvious answer is “whatever the total accessible evidence supports.” The relevant evidence will include the statistics on completion rates, especially in A's field. It will include facts about A's capacity for skillful and original scholarship, argumentation, and writing, as well as any considerations bearing on A's potential for improvement. It will include facts about A's circumstances, including the supportiveness and fairness of the committee, A's financial security, and so forth. And it will include facts about A's level of commitment to finishing, in the sense of how much of a priority it is, as well as A's propensity to procrastinate and otherwise succumb to temptation at the expense of getting any writing done. Solely this and any other information relevant to A's prospects should determine what you believe about the probability that A will complete a passable dissertation.

The much less obvious answer we aim to explore here is “it depends on your relationship with A.” We normally think of allowing our beliefs to be influenced by our personal relationships and emotions as the paradigmatic case of epistemic irrationality, insofar as our relationships and emotions are irrelevant to the truth of those beliefs. When it comes to our friends, family members, colleagues, patients and mentees, it might be that

we have ethical or practical reasons to *act as though* we are more optimistic about their prospects than we really are, in order to be supportive. We should tell them that we believe in them, that they can do whatever they put their mind to, and that where there's a will, there's a way. But if the question is whether what we *actually believe* should be influenced by our partiality toward certain people, the presumptive answer is 'no.'

A powerful motivation for denying that our beliefs should be partial to our significant others¹ is the conviction that there cannot be practical or ethical reasons that bear directly on the question of what to believe. If there were, the thought goes, we would be unable to respond to them in deliberation, or consciously hold our beliefs on the basis of them. To deliberate about what to believe just is to deliberate about what is true, and the question of what is true cannot be answered by appeal to considerations bearing on what is useful or valuable.² And reasons for belief, one might think, must be the kind of thing that we can consciously believe *for*.

Whether or not this line of thought is ultimately correct, we will assume for the sake of argument that there are no practical or ethical reasons for belief, or requirements of practical rationality that take beliefs as their direct objects. Our interest is in whether some degree of epistemic partiality toward our significant others' aspirations can be vindicated without appeal to the controversial claim that our beliefs ought sometimes to be based on practical or ethical considerations. Thus, for all we will say here, the first "Evidentialist" answer offered above is correct if the question is "*what should you think about* when deciding what to believe about A's prospects?" However, we will argue that this does not settle the original question concerning what you should in fact believe. To answer that question, one must ask whether there can be legitimate practical or ethical influences on the *standards by which we reason* about what to believe. We will suggest that there can be. We will then attempt to open the door for the possibility of epistemic partiality by considering the case in which A is *oneself*. We will argue (drawing on previous work) that we are epistemically justified in reasoning differently about the evidence bearing on the prospect of succeeding in our own difficult, long-term endeavors than we would reason about a stranger's prospects given the same evidence. We will then return to the case in which A is neither yourself nor a stranger, but someone you have a significant relationship with. When our significant others set out to do something difficult, should we reason about the likelihood of their success more as we would about a stranger's, or more as we would about ourselves?

Our question is a specific instance of a general topic inspired independently by Sarah Stroud and Simon Keller: do the norms of friendship require doxastic practices that conflict with epistemic norms?³ Stroud and Keller each argue that they do. But Stroud in particular focuses on a case in which one receives evidence concerning an event that has already happened – it is alleged that a friend has behaved badly, and you must decide what to believe

¹ A hideous phrase, but useful for referring to the category of important relationships that is wider than friendship.

² For example, Shah (2003).

³ Keller (2004); Stroud (2006)

in light of that evidence. In contrast, our focus is specifically on how to think about the *agency* of our significant others, the results of which lie in a not-yet-determined future. In this respect, our topic is similar to that raised by Chapter Seven of Berislav Marušić's book *Evidence and Agency: Norms of Belief for Promising and Resolving* (2015). Marušić, however, constrains his remarks to cases in which the other has *promised* one that he will succeed, or otherwise invited the other to trust and rely upon him. Our interest is in a more mundane and less ethically loaded kind of case in which there is no promise or invitation to rely; we simply come to know in some way or other that a friend has the end of writing a passable Ph.D. thesis, or running a marathon, or losing twenty pounds. Could it be that our relationships obligate us to "believe in others" even in these cases?

I. *Evidential thresholds*

The first question is whether and how practical and ethical considerations can play a role in determining what a thinker ought to believe. We have assumed that they cannot play the role of reasons for belief. However, they might legitimately play a role in shaping the standards that structure our reasoning. To see the difference between reasons and standards, think about Achilles and the Tortoise. The norms and principles that govern how we draw conclusions from our "premises," or reasons for belief, cannot themselves feature in reasoning as premises. Rather, they operate in the background of our reasoning, guiding us in our responses to the evidence we explicitly consider.

One such standard of reasoning concerns the thinker's sensitivity to new evidence. How much evidence does she require in a given context before she comes to a conclusion about what to believe, or revises a previously-held belief? Call this the thinker's "evidential threshold" with respect to a given question in a given context. The important point for our purposes is that evidential thresholds are not fixed across contexts; they go up and down. A vivid example of this concerns the sensitivity of our thresholds to what is at stake in getting the right answer (though it is not essential to our view that the reader accept this form of "pragmatic encroachment"). If there is little at stake, the thinker might have a relatively low threshold, such that she will go ahead and update her beliefs in light of fairly weak evidence. In other, high-stakes cases, her threshold will be higher, such that the evidence must be strongly compelling before she commits to a conclusion. It will be useful to talk about the way in which a thinker's evidential thresholds adjust to the context as being governed by general "evidential policies" that the thinker has, although in using this terminology, we do not mean to suggest that the thinker actually reflectively adopts these standards. Rather, it is simply a way of modeling the fact that our evidential thresholds systematically respond to certain relevant features of the thinker's context.⁴

⁴ Though perhaps not exhaustively; there will likely be other factors that illicitly influence a thinker's evidential thresholds.

With these tools at our disposal, we can now ask: what kinds of considerations bear on whether a thinker has the evidential policies that she ought to have? In other words, what sorts of factors should influence how our evidential thresholds behave across contexts? Our view grants to the Evidentialist that on a first pass, a rational evidential policy will be concerned only with truth or accuracy, given the thinker's cognitive limitations, time pressures, and other such constraints. An evidential policy will be better to the extent that it leads a cognitively and temporally limited thinker like ourselves to respond to her evidence in a way that will be more accurate or truth-conducive. Thus, two equally rational epistemic policies cannot differ in the overall expected accuracy of the attitudes they prescribe given a fixed body of evidence.

However, we suggest that it is implausible to suppose that these purely epistemic considerations will suffice to pick out a uniquely best evidential policy to have, especially when it comes to contexts that require making predictions about what agents will do in the future.⁵ Indeed, it is difficult to see what kind of objective fact *could* ground the unique rationality of an evidential policy, independently of our interests and the way we choose to frame our hypotheses.⁶ And as William James famously argued, a concern for truth does not in itself determine precisely how one ought to trade off caution and adventurousness. Thus, we submit that there will frequently be more than one rationally permissible epistemic policy available from the point of view of truth or accuracy. This means that equally rational thinkers can have different thresholds for belief change in a given context, such that they disagree about exactly what counts as evidence that is compelling enough to form or revise a belief on that basis.

When there are multiple evidential policies that are rationally permissible for a given thinker to have from the point of view of purely epistemic considerations, we suggest that practical and ethical considerations can and should play a role at that point in deciding between epistemically permissible policies. Once the epistemic reasons run out, a policy is better to the extent that it is ethically superior, or advantageous to us in achieving our non-epistemic goals.⁷ The leeway here is constrained,⁸ and on our view, it will not be the case that we should ever trade accuracy for advantage. Still, it is a way in which practical considerations can matter for what we believe without acting as reasons for belief.⁹

⁵ This is effectively a rejection of the so-called Uniqueness Thesis: that there is in every case a uniquely rational doxastic attitude to adopt in light of a body of evidence. See White (2005); Kelly (2013).

⁶ Titelbaum (2010); Schoenfield (2014).

⁷ One might ask: "epistemically better, or practically better?" On the approach we are advocating, this is not a clear distinction at the level of the standards that govern reasoning. It is better epistemically, in that it is better as a standard of theoretical reasoning, and it is better practically, in that it is better in light of practical considerations. Simply put, it is better *qua* evidential policy. Thanks to Hille Paakkunainen and Sigrún Svavarsdóttir for pushing us to clarify this point.

⁸ It would be nice to be able to say how limited. We see no good way of doing that, except to say that the considerations that support Permissivism over Uniqueness do not favor versions on which there is only a narrow latitude over versions that allow for significant disagreement (see Schoenfield (2014)).

⁹ Here, we echo Hawley (2014) and Kwall (2013), who also point out that the denial of the Uniqueness thesis will be relevant to the question of whether it is epistemically permissible to use different standards in the case of one's friends than one does in the case of non-friends.

II. “Grit” and epistemic resilience

In light of the apparatus introduced in Section I, how should we think about the scenario in which the agent who has adopted a difficult, long-term goal is oneself? The first thing to notice is that when people fail to accomplish these kinds of ends, it is frequently in part because they at some point abandoned them. Of course, this will not always be the case; if the goal has a strict deadline, or if there is a particular make-or-break opportunity that will never be repeated, then it is possible to fail without ever giving up on the goal. But many of our aspirations are not as specific as this. We aspire to run a marathon *at some point*, or to become a commercially successful comedian *eventually*, or to defend a dissertation *in the next few years*. As long as it is possible to keep pursuing the goal after encountering setbacks or failing at particular attempts, the decision to give up will be part of the explanation for why the agent never pulled it off.

The significance of this point is that perseverance, or “grit,” is necessary for success.¹⁰ It is certainly not sufficient, and it is sometimes not even a good idea. We can rightly abandon our goals when we have compelling reason to believe, in light of our abilities or circumstances, that we are unlikely to succeed even if we do continue to try.¹¹ There might be other options that are also good and more likely to work out. That said, the disposition to give up easily, as soon as one encounters setbacks, is very costly: it will prevent us from achieving difficult ends or maintaining relationships over the long term, even if we value these projects and relationships very highly. Without grit, such accomplishments and relationships would be accessible to us only if a good deal of luck clears our path of the obstacles and rough patches that such pursuits normally involve. The capacity to persevere in the face of obstacles is thus generally advantageous to us (in many contexts, at least).¹²

Elsewhere we have argued that grit is in part an epistemic matter: the gritty person’s estimation of the likelihood that she will ultimately succeed is resilient against the impact of the evidence provided by experiences of failure, rejection, injury, and other setbacks.¹³ The conjecture is that in many cases, agents who give up on their difficult goals do so in part because they come to doubt that they will succeed even if they continue to try. This can happen for a variety of reasons, but one reason an agent might lose confidence is that she is

¹⁰ Duckworth (2016).

¹¹ It depends upon the case, of course. If the goal is morally or politically important – bringing about the end of apartheid, say – then it can be reasonable to pursue it even while believing the chances of success are very small (though in such cases, one usually orients oneself primarily toward smaller, more achievable goals). Similarly, if the agent is deeply passionate about her goal to the exclusion of other values in life, it might be reasonable to take the long shot – though we should not underestimate the significance of the opportunity costs incurred by devoting all of one’s time and energy to one risky activity.

¹² We leave it open here whether there might also be ethical considerations that favor having the capacity for grit, in addition to the instrumental benefits the capacity often confers (though not always – it can be disadvantageous to be gritty in some contexts).

¹³ Morton and Paul (forthcoming.). Albert Bandura pioneered the research on self-efficacy beliefs and their importance to achievement (Bandura (1989)).

responding to genuine evidence that her efforts will not ultimately be rewarded. Losing a race, getting a journal rejection, or receiving a negative review of one's photo exhibition are not only emotionally painful experiences; they are also a sign that you will not achieve your goal even if you persevere. If this is right, then the gritty person tends to maintain sufficient confidence that her efforts will ultimately succeed – not necessarily outright believing that she will triumph, but considering it likely enough to merit continuing to try and thereby paying the corresponding opportunity costs.¹⁴ In other words, she is epistemically resilient in the face of negative evidence.

There are a variety of ways to achieve this kind of resilience, many of which are likely to be epistemically irrational: we can ignore obvious evidence suggesting we may fail, or nurture positive illusions about our own capabilities. However, the mechanism of evidential thresholds helps us to see how epistemic resilience is available even to an agent who does not ignore evidence, and who bases her beliefs solely on evidence. The thought is that insofar as the capacity for grit is advantageous to an agent, this consideration can legitimately bear on the evidential policies she reasons with, after purely epistemic considerations have been exhausted. Other things equal, within the set of policies that are epistemically permissible, she ought to reason with a “grit-friendly” policy. Such a policy would lead her to raise her evidential threshold with respect to the question “will I succeed at ϕ -ing if I continue to try?” once she adopts ϕ as an end, relative to the threshold that would govern her answer to that question if ϕ -ing were not her adopted end, and relative to that which would tend to govern her evaluation of another person's prospects. In other words, a gritty agent will require more compelling evidence to revise her initial belief about the likelihood that she will succeed at her own ends than she would require if she had not adopted those ends, or than a disinterested observer would tend to require in reasoning about the same question. And this need not be epistemically irrational, as long as her threshold is not so high that she is resistant to evidence of impending failure that is too compelling to permit of rational disagreement.

Again, to be clear, the claim is not that it is rational to reason about what to believe on the basis of considerations showing perseverance to be valuable. Further, conduciveness to grit is only one such consideration, and will thus contribute only *pro tanto* rational pressure that may be outweighed by other considerations. But if the “Evidential Threshold Account” is on the right track, the agent may well be entitled to believe that her chances of success are better than an equally rational observer with the same evidence takes them to be. The

¹⁴ Again, the requisite amount of optimism will vary depending on the alternatives available. It is far easier to make sense of persevering if you take yourself to have no other options, either because you are desperate (“It's either crawl across the desert with a gunshot wound to the gut, or die trying”) or because you are so passionate about your goal that the alternatives seem worse than failure (“Becoming a celebrated painter is the only thing that will make my life worth living”). It is more difficult if there are other options available that one considers pretty good, and that can easily start to appear easier to succeed at when things are not going well with one's current commitments. An agent in this latter situation – which we take to be most common – will be especially vulnerable to quitting as a result of encountering setbacks, if the evidential import of those setbacks causes her estimation of her eventual success to drop too low.

disinterested observer might reasonably think that enough evidence is in to conclude that the agent's prospects are dim, whereas the agent reasonably thinks that the jury is still out.

III. *Believing in others: an ethical requirement?*

All of this background deserves much more argument, some of which we have tried to give elsewhere. But for now, let us take the framework for granted and reframe the question in the following way: how, if at all, should our evidential policies be shaped by our relationships? A tempting first response is that no matter who we are, or with whom we have relationships, we can have any of the evidential policies that are epistemically permissible. Even if the disinterested observer would tend to use a lower evidential threshold to update her beliefs about an agent's eventual success than the agent herself would, there would be nothing wrong with using the same threshold as the agent, as long as it is in the range of what is epistemically permissible. This is true, but it is not a full answer to our question. While there may be nothing *epistemically* to choose between policies that are within the permissible range, it does not follow that they are equally justified, all things considered. An evidential policy might be epistemically permissible but defective from a practical or ethical point of view.

Second, it is important to reiterate that our focus is on cases in which the other has made no promise to succeed, and has not otherwise explicitly invited one to rely on his succeeding. Other discussions of this question have tended to treat it as an issue of trust, not merely in the sense of acquiring evidence-based knowledge through testimony, but in the sense of trusting the other to follow through on a vow. This is certainly an important topic in its own right, but the role of the promise or invitation to trust adds additional complexity that we prefer to do without. It is *prima facie* plausible that we might have an obligation to believe in our significant others even if they have made no promise, and even if they themselves are uncertain about pulling it off. So for our purposes, the relevant cases are those in which you simply come to know by some means or other that a friend, family member, colleague, mentee, or other person with whom you have a significant relationship has adopted a difficult end.¹⁵

Here is a first proposal: certain significant relationships constitutively involve treating the other's ends as one's own, such that failing to do so is *ipso facto* a defect in the relationship. A broadly Aristotelian form of this thought is that our friends are "another self."¹⁶ While we might have good will toward many people, and wish them well, this is not sufficient in a significant relationship. The latter requires an active merging of interests, such that the other's good becomes one's own good. To prioritize one's own ends, or otherwise to treat one's own success as more significant than the success of one's significant others, would be to fail at a central demand of the relationship. If this is right, it would follow straightforwardly

¹⁵ Even if the other communicates to us that they have the end, we are deeply skeptical (*pace* Hinchman (2005)) that merely telling someone that P is in itself an invitation to trust in the sense that engages ethical obligations.

¹⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 8.

that we should employ the same optimistic evidential policies that facilitate epistemic resilience in our own case when our significant others' aspirations are concerned.

But although the metaphor of treating the other's ends "as one's own" is appealing, we suggest that it becomes problematic when taken together with other aspects of having a significant relationship with someone. It is simply not true in general that we can relate to others' ends in just the same way we relate to our own. In normal cases, at least, we take an end to be our own only if, and largely because, we deem it to be worthy of pursuit. As this point is sometimes put, our own ends are "transparent" to the justification for pursuing them.¹⁷ This fact is already built in to the Evidential Threshold Account as it applies in the first-personal case, since our evidential threshold should only be raised only after we have settled on the end and thereby (normally) deemed it to be choiceworthy. Of course, we may be wrong about this – it may not in fact be a good end to pursue. But from the first-personal perspective, perseverance is only intelligible if the goal continues to be viewed as worthy of pursuit.

The problem is that our significant others can, and often do, adopt ends that are different from those we think they should have. They go in for careers we think they are ill-suited for, or even that we think are morally dubious. They commit to relationships with people we think are unworthy of them. They devote themselves to hobbies that we simply cannot see the point of. The full-bore Aristotelian view seems to be that we cannot achieve the fullest form of friendship with someone whose ends we do not take to be good. But this is a deeply implausible view of friendship, and even more implausible when it comes to romantic partners and family members. The relationship of a parent to his child is not diminished by the fact that the child does not have the ends he thinks she should have. Rather, though we can have genuine relationships with people whose ends we take to be foolish or even wrong, we cannot straightforwardly treat those ends as our own.

One might counter that in order to be optimistic about our significant others' chances of succeeding, we do not have to accept their reasons for acting. After all, our prediction about whether they will succeed ought to be based on evidence, and not whether we want them to succeed. But while this is true, it is difficult to reconcile this stance with the "another self" rationale we are considering. Justifiable optimism that the other will succeed in her goals depends on expecting that she will continue to try. But if we judge that her goal is not choiceworthy, and if we are conceiving of her as another self, then we must desire that she come to see this and abandon it – after all, that is what we would want for ourselves. Practical reasoning in service of this desire will therefore pull apart from theoretical reasoning that is resistant to reasons for doubting that she will succeed. To predict that she will fail to see the reasons to abandon her unworthy end would be to abdicate the responsibility to help bring it about that she does, and this is a responsibility we cannot evade if we are genuinely treating the end as our own.

¹⁷ Although for doubts about the claim that they are fully transparent, see Paul (2012).

In light of these worries, we might consider a version of the first proposal that is restricted to those ends for which transparency holds – the ends of our significant others that we ourselves think they ought to have. The thought would be that we ought to reason with epistemically resilient evidential policies only when we ourselves endorse the other’s project; otherwise, we should reason about them in the same way we would about a stranger. This might be a coherent possibility, but we suggest that it is problematically *patronizing*. It is less an expansion of the boundaries of the self than it is an incorporation of others. What is missing from the “other self” picture is precisely that the other is not you – she is an autonomous being in her own right, whose capacity to set ends for herself should be respected. Some significant relationships are legitimately patronizing, such as parenting young children, coaching, and teaching. Such relationships might also be conditional on the other being committed to a particular project. But with respect to friendship, romantic relationships, and relationships with older children, we suggest that it is a defect of the relationship for our reasoning about whether they will succeed to distinguish sharply between the ends that we would have chosen for them and those we would not have. This kind of patronizing partiality would be at odds with the respect for the other’s autonomy that the ideal forms of these relationships plausibly involve.

In light of this objection, let us turn our attention to a second proposal: perhaps we ought to extend our optimistic evidential policies to our significant others out of respect for their agency, or capacity to set ends for themselves. The difficulty here is to understand what “respect for others’ agency” comes to in more concrete terms. One obvious possibility is that there is a universal, Kantian requirement to take others’ capacity for end-setting as seriously as one takes one’s own. The rationale for this kind of approach begins with emphasizing the limits of the transparency even of our own ends. It is not the case that we must believe each of our ends to be the *most* worthy option available to us; rather, we often take ourselves to be choosing between a wide variety of ends that are all permissible, or that exemplify incomparable kinds of value. In these normatively underdetermined situations, we must commit to one of the permissible ends even though we judge the other options to be just as choiceworthy. And insofar as we view our own commitments as normatively significant for us, over and above the significance of our reasons for action, the thought is that we should view the legislation of other wills to be equally significant, even when they are not fully supported by the reasons as we see them.

Clearly, though, a universal requirement will not serve to vindicate epistemic partiality. It might be, as Kant seems to have held, that respect for autonomy wherever we find it grounds a duty of beneficence not to unduly interfere with the ability of others to pursue their ends, and to help promote the ends of others on some occasions. Such a duty could justify behavior that is effectively partial, in that we might have more opportunities to promote the ends of those with whom we interact frequently. However, the relationships themselves would make no intrinsic difference. Even more problematically for our purposes, any attempt to cash out the idea of respect for the agency of others in terms of optimistic evidential policies will likely turn out to be incoherent. Many of our ends are difficult to

achieve precisely because they are competitive: not everyone can win the race, or get the job, or be the voice of their generation. To be more optimistic about one's friend's chances of success in such cases is *ipso facto* to be less sanguine about the chances of someone else.

A more promising version of this second proposal looks to locate a norm specific to our significant relationships that requires a kind of regard for their practical commitments that does not extend to all agents. Stroud suggests that a bias toward interpreting evidence about our friends' deeds and character in a positive light would make sense if friendship were constitutively contingent on esteem for our friends' merits.¹⁸ Threats to our esteem for our friends would act as threats to the relationship itself; thus, concern for the relationship might justify being resistant to such threats. An analogous thought might be that our significant relationships constitutively involve special esteem for the other *qua* agent, and that this underwrites a bias against believing they are likely to fail in their projects.

If understood as esteem for their ability to *succeed*, the proposal is patently false – it is not a constitutive element of friendship or any of the other relationships under consideration here that we view the other as a winner. In fact, the truth more plausibly runs in the other direction. If our friendship, collegiality, or willingness to mentor another person is conditional on them being successful, this is a defect in the relationship. However, perhaps there is a form of esteem for our significant others' agency that is in tension not with doubting that they will succeed, but rather with doubting *the reality of their commitments* to their professed ends. By 'reality', we mean something like 'prioritizing the goal as much as they profess to'. It is certainly possible to doubt that another person will lose 20 pounds on a diet, or run a marathon, or write a book simply because you do not think they are really committed to that goal. You would expect this lack of commitment to be manifested in procrastination, for example, or a propensity to put other things first – the diet always gives way to special occasions, or the writing must always be put aside in favor of some other obligation like helping a friend move. Doubt on these grounds is distinct from skepticism that they have the needed ability, or that the circumstances will favor them, or even that they have the will-power needed to resist interfering temptations – since a lack of will-power can only be manifested in the presence of a sincere commitment. The expectation is not that they will try and fail, but rather that they will never really get going.

In our view, this latter version of the proposal is the most promising candidate for an ethical requirement concerning our beliefs about our significant others' agency: that there should be a presumption against doubting the reality of their practical commitments. In the next section, we will attempt to sketch the shape this presumption should take.

IV. *Strawson, Sartre, commitment, and success*

The first point to make is that in the context of a significant relationship, there is a heightened presumption of honesty, and a correspondingly heightened presumption that the

¹⁸ Stroud (2006), 511.

other's sincere assertions should be taken to be truthful. If the other avows that he is fully committed to becoming a professional beekeeper, there would be a distinctive wrong involved in concluding without good reason that his assertion is *dishonest* – it would be to suppose that he has violated a special obligation to you. This observation does not go very far in this context, however, for at least two reasons. One reason is that in doubting the reality of his commitment, we need not suppose that he is being dishonest with anyone other than himself. In the most common kind of case, the other believes he is fully committed to his goal, and is sincere in his assertion that he is, even though he is not actually disposed to make a real effort. The second reason is that the avowal seems to be unnecessary to generate the relevant obligation. The tension arises even if we discovered in another way that he takes himself to have the end, and to have made it a genuine priority.

Why might it wrong him to suspect that this is so? Here we will to some extent follow Marušić, who follows Sartre and Strawson, in speaking of different stances we can take toward a person.¹⁹ To put it in our own preferred terminology, the problem stems from adopting a *diagnostic* stance on another when she is presenting herself to us as a *rational* agent. To think of a person from a diagnostic perspective is to assess their condition on the basis of evidence that may include, but that is not limited to, their representation of themselves as acting, believing, and feeling for certain reasons. For instance, if Jorge claims to be upset because his partner acted inconsiderately, and his partner responds by telling Jorge that he is only upset because he is hungry, this would be to shift into the diagnostic perspective rather than to take Jorge's professed reasons at face value.

There can be a kind of disrespect involved in taking the diagnostic perspective that is distinct from simply suspecting the other of dishonesty. It is decidedly difficult to articulate what this disrespect consists in, but it seems to be connected with viewing a person as an object whose behavior can be explained and predicted like any other mechanism. Plausibly, we want our significant others to view us as largely rational beings to be engaged with on rational terms, rather than as mechanisms to be theorized about. A very strong conclusion to draw from this point is that it is always *prima facie* wrong to address or represent our significant others diagnostically when a rational perspective is available. But we think this goes much too far; after all, we are also objects, and our behaviors do have causes that are not rational. It is not an inherent defect in a relationship to acknowledge this aspect of our nature; indeed, we will only fully be understood by the people who care for us if it is acknowledged. As Marušić points out, there are two kinds of bad faith on Sartre's view: denying an agent's freedom, and denying her facticity.²⁰

What is needed, then, is a way to think about how these demands should be balanced in the context of a relationship. Marušić proposes that this should be viewed as a demand to trust the other by accepting her answer to a question as our own, tempered by an assessment of whether the other is in fact trustworthy.²¹ For reasons that we have explained,

¹⁹ Marušić (2015); Strawson (1962); Sartre (1943).

²⁰ Mark Schroeder also investigates this theme, in a way we are sympathetic to, in "Persons as Things" (ms.).

²¹ 200-202.

we believe an account is needed that extends more widely to conditions in which trust is not centrally at issue. We suggest instead that significant relationships demand resistance to adopting the diagnostic perspective that can be overcome not merely by evidence of untrustworthiness, but more generally by certain kinds of evidence indicating the presence of a rational breakdown such as self-deception. The proposal is that in the context of a significant relationship, the default perspective should be the rational perspective (when available), and that one should require significant and specific evidence of a rational breakdown before switching to the diagnostic mode.

This kind of resistance can be modeled using the Evidential Threshold Account, although that is certainly not the only way to understand it. The thought would be that the switch from the rational to the diagnostic perspective should be governed by evidence, and that the threshold should be higher in the context of a significant relationship than it is when addressing a stranger or mere acquaintance.²² There might be nothing objectionable, for instance, about conjecturing without much evidence that your neighbor's professed New Year's resolution to start exercising regularly will come to nothing. But when the aspiring exerciser is a friend, lover, or other instance of significant other, one should have good evidence that something is rationally amiss before switching to the diagnostic perspective. The higher evidential threshold embodies a bias in favor of engaging on rational terms with our friends, at least when it comes to their capacity to set ends for themselves.

What kind of evidence counts as compelling in such contexts? We cannot offer anything like a full answer here, but one especially vexing kind of case concerns a pattern of past behavior. What to think when one's friend has "committed" to a relationship or a diet many times in the past, only to make clear in his complete lack of follow-through that the commitment was meaningless to him? It is tempting to suppose that a pattern such as this justifies us in assuming next time that his "commitment" is just as unreal. But the Sartrean insight here is that the agential perspective requires us to deny that our past determines what we will do in the future. This perspective is extremely difficult to maintain, however, when one's closest companions are convinced that it does – that we will never change, and are prisoners of our past mistakes. Respect for the agency of our significant others demands that we refrain from undermining their ability to see themselves as capable of setting genuine ends for themselves going forward. And if we are to see them as agents, rather than merely as objects compelled by non-rational forces, we must not foreclose the possibility that their future might depart from the pattern we have witnessed thus far. Therefore, we think that past behavior alone should generally not constitute the kind of evidence that compels us to switch to the diagnostic mode and view the other in light of his facticity. There can be exceptions, when for instance we take the other to be self-deceived about past failures and thus unable to have learned anything from them. But in general, the thought is that we are

²² This is not to deny that there might be an ethical obligation to view all persons from the rational perspective, if possible. If that is the case, then our claim is that this obligation is heightened in the context of a significant relationship. It might also be that the requirement in the case of friendship is more nuanced than our brief remarks suggest, and that it varies with the kind of proposition one is considering.

better friends to the extent that we view each new commitment as genuine, even if the past has been otherwise.

If this is right, then we can wrong our significant others by doubting the sincerity of their commitments, if this doubt is the product of an overly low evidential threshold for adopting the diagnostic perspective. This is the sense in which our relationships constitutively require a limited form of respect for one another's agency, for we are agents primarily from the rational perspective. Not all instances of doubting the sincerity of the other's commitment wrong them, since we can have compelling evidence for our doubts, but some instances do. To this extent, we can be justified in having more optimistic expectations about our significant others' endeavors than a stranger with the same evidence would tend to have.

On our view, however, this point does not get us as far as some Sartreans suppose. As we understand it, merely taking the other's commitment to the end to be genuine is far from enough to expect that he will actually succeed. It is simply to expect that if he fails, it will not be because he abandoned the goal without ever really trying.²³ To exhibit respect for another's capacity to set ends for herself does not require optimism that her abilities, opportunities, and self-discipline will be enough to get the job done. To suppose that it does, one must suppose that sincerely trying to ϕ entails succeeding at ϕ -ing. But in the cases at issue, when the agent has adopted a difficult, long-term end, we usually have no good reason to believe that such an entailment holds. The central question at issue in reasoning about whether they will ultimately succeed is "Is ϕ -ing up to them, such that if they continue to try, they will succeed?" And this question can only be answered by reflecting on the evidence we have concerning their abilities, the kinds of opportunities we expect them to be offered, their capacity to resist temptation and sacrifice for the sake of the goal, and so forth. In other words, it is a diagnostic question.²⁴

V. *Believing in others: an instrumental requirement?*

Let us now approach the topic from a different angle. We have been exploring ethical considerations bearing on how we should view our significant others. One such consideration that we have not yet mentioned is that all of these relationships constitutively involve caring for the well-being of the other. As long as the ends they have set for themselves are not exceedingly foolish, dangerous, or morally wrong, we want them to succeed and thereby flourish according to their own standards. We want them to persevere when the

²³ This might be too quick, since it may be possible genuinely to have an end without ever doing anything to further it. For instance, if the agent has other commitments that she considers far more central or important, then these commitments might happen to supersede the less important end on any occasion where she would otherwise have acted to further it. We might nevertheless take the end to be genuine in virtue of accepting counterfactuals in which the more important commitments are absent and the agent does try to accomplish the end. Thanks to Ben Bagley for raising this possibility.

²⁴ We argue for this point in more detail in Morton and Paul (forthcoming).

chances of success are good enough, given the alternatives available to them, and if they can afford the risk of failure. That said, we also want them to bow out gracefully and pursue a different end when it has become clear that the outlook is too unpromising to justify the opportunity costs, or when failure would be too catastrophic to risk. Given this goal, are there further instrumental pressures on us to reason about their prospects in a way that will tend to promote their well-being?

The difficulty lies in teasing apart the various ways in which our actions and speech can affect whether others persevere from any distinctive practical role that our beliefs might play. The first-personal case is more straightforward in this way, since we cannot easily or effectively act toward ourselves as though we are more confident in our chances than we really are. In the case of others, in contrast, there are a variety of ways in which we can influence their choices about when to give up without necessarily having the optimistic belief ourselves. For this reason, the instrumental considerations that favor grit-friendly policies in the first-personal case do not apply in just the same way to the case of others.

In some cases, we can directly influence whether the other perseveres, insofar as we wield authority over whether they give up. A parent or coach, for example, might be in a position to forbid their charge to quit. Angela Duckworth emphasizes the importance of parenting for developing and enabling grit, and in particular, a “wise” parenting style that imposes limits on when their children are allowed to give up on a pursuit once they have started it.²⁵ In one of her examples of good parenting, she recounts that “Steve and his siblings were made to understand that, whatever they signed up for, they had to see it through to the end.” This parenting technique counters the effect of confidence-diminishing experiences on the child simply by taking the decision about whether to persevere out of the child’s hands.

In other cases, the influence is indirect. An agent’s significant others can have a substantial effect on her choices about whether to persevere by shaping her relevant attitudes. This point applies not only to the agent’s beliefs, but also to her preferences and evaluative judgments. A coach, parent, or friend might help the agent persevere in the face of difficulty by reminding her what she loves about the activity, and why it is a worthy goal to have. This can help combat the influence of “sour grapes:” the tendency to devalue a goal or cease to prefer an outcome as a result of finding it to be difficult to achieve.²⁶ The aspiring academic might receive several journal rejections in a row, and be led as a result to change her mind about the value of becoming a professional academic – “it’s just a bunch of smug navel-gazers talking to each other about things that don’t really matter, anyway.” Her significant others might then try to direct her attention back to the reasons for taking an academic career to be valuable and worthy of pursuit. They might also try to convince her that perseverance itself is valuable, and that even if academia ultimately does not work out, she does not want to be the kind of person who quits as soon as she encounters a setback.

²⁵ Duckworth (2016), chapter 10.

²⁶ Elster (1983).

More importantly for our purposes, they can do something similar if the agent starts to lose confidence that her efforts will eventually pay off. Suppose the Ph.D. student interprets the journal rejections as evidence that she is incapable of doing work that will be considered excellent by the gatekeepers of the discipline. She thus comes to believe that the chances that she will write a passing dissertation and get a tenure-track job are too low to justify continuing to try, thereby paying high opportunity costs. Her advisers might suggest ways of understanding the new evidence that are compatible with a more optimistic prognosis. They might point out that referees can be inattentive, biased, or intoxicated, or provide examples of people who are successful in the field who received similar rejections. Or they might offer reasons for the student to believe that her abilities are not immutable, and that her work could improve with effort. By spinning the evidence in this way, they might lead the student to believe that her chances of success are higher than she otherwise would have, and thus help her to see perseverance as justified.²⁷

The effectiveness of this kind of spin will vary, of course, with the rationality of the agent and the credibility of the spin doctor. When our parents try to encourage us to be more optimistic in this way concerning endeavors that they are not especially familiar with, it often does not work. If our rational faculties are functioning well enough, the interpretation of the evidence being offered must strike us as plausible enough to accept on epistemic grounds. In this respect, seeing the significant other as sufficiently expert to have a legitimate perspective on the evidence is important. Of course, in some cases, the agent is motivated enough to remain optimistic that she is willing to grasp at straws and accept obviously distorted views of the evidence.

For a rational agent, it will also depend on how much leeway there is for reasonable disagreement. The goals and activities that allow for the most latitude in this respect will tend to be long-term, such that the prediction about whether the agent will succeed if she continues to try concerns the far future. Relatedly, they will be better to the extent that they specify no firm deadline for success. Reasonable disagreement over what to predict in light of the current evidence will often concern how much room there is for change. Are the requisite abilities amenable to improvement, or do there tend to be hard limits? How likely is it that the circumstances will become more favorable? Are we capable of reforming our various tendencies to undermine ourselves? The evidence bearing on these questions will often be inconclusive, leaving room for reasonable disagreement. This is a respect in which our cases are importantly different from Stroud's central example, which concerns an event that has already happened. Evidence concerning a past event can be inconclusive, but not because there is still room to affect what will happen.

The question is now: in this kind of situation, what should you *actually believe*? It is clearly possible to engage in this practice and thereby encourage someone to have a belief that one does not share oneself. Thus, many of the pragmatic benefits to the agent of being

²⁷ Bandura's work on self-efficacy beliefs supports the claim that parents, teachers, and coaches can significantly influence educational outcomes and career trajectories by way of influencing the student's sense of self-efficacy. For a review see Usher and Pajares (2008).

supportive can be had without going so far as to have the optimistic belief oneself. Framing the question this way therefore helps us to focus on the demands that our relationships might place on us that apply directly to our beliefs, and not only to the consequences of acting as though one believes.

There are instrumental reasons that favor simply using the same evidential policies to reason about our friends' success as we use in our own case, and thus sharing the optimistic belief we are trying to get them to have. For one thing, we should not overestimate the effectiveness of encouraging others to adopt an interpretation of the evidence that one does not share oneself. Those who know us well will tend to discern the truth, and discount our suggestions accordingly. Thus, to really help our significant others have the beliefs they should have, it will be most effective if we simply occupy that evidential perspective ourselves.

Further, there is something manipulative about encouraging others to have a belief one does not share oneself. To push them to see the evidence differently than you see it might strike us as disrespectful, in a way that is similar to the disrespect sometimes involved in taking the diagnostic stance on them: we are operating on them, even as we persuade by appeal to rational considerations. Insofar as we are pushing them to have a belief that we take to be somewhat mistaken, this is deceptive – if benevolently so. To the extent that even benevolent deception is to be avoided within the context of significant relationships, this is a consideration that favors simply having the optimistic belief oneself.

However, it is tricky to pin down how exactly this form of benevolent deception *wrongs* the other. After all, if our view of permissible evidential resilience is correct, in encouraging others to be optimistic we will actually be pushing them toward the belief that they ought to have. If the wrong of manipulation is that it leads an agent to pursue a goal that she would not otherwise choose for herself, this kind of wrong is not present; by hypothesis, by propping up her confidence that her efforts will pay off, we are leading her only to pursue a goal that she did choose for herself. Of course, we can wrong her by overdoing it; if we push her to take such a rosy view of her prospects that she crosses over into delusional optimism, we are depriving her of the opportunity to see that giving up and pursuing another alternative might be a better choice. The point is only that she might be rationally permitted to be more optimistic than we are, and that the result of the manipulation might therefore be unobjectionable.

Sarah Buss has argued that, in fact, this sort of benign manipulation is often a part of romantic relationships and other aspects of our lives.²⁸ Imagine that Adhira invites her friend Misha to a Jens Lekman concert. In convincing him to go, she might focus his attention on potentially enjoyable aspects of the evening, despite knowing that Misha is skeptical of the entertainment value of Swedish singer-songwriters, because she also knows that he will have a good time if he does join her. If the goal – to enjoy a concert together – is one that Misha values and would endorse, and there is no deceit involved, then any wrong here is of a fairly benign sort. In fact, it is often perceptible out of the corner of one's eye that this sort of 'spin'

²⁸ Buss (2005).

is part of what is going on. When the coach cheers her trainee on from the sidelines, the swimmer need not be outright deceived about what the coach is up to (though he might well refrain from reflecting explicitly on her motives). And if he believes that being confident is going to help him succeed, he might reasonably expect his coach to spin the evidence positively to encourage him. Of course, Misha and the swimmer cannot examine this aspect of the interaction too closely without undermining the desired effect, but it is not unusual to want to be swept up by non-rational influences in order to fall in love, enjoy an evening together, or enter the race with a strut in our step.

These considerations do not justify outright deception or lying by our significant others even if it is for our own good. It is important in our account that what is at stake here is positive spin, not doctoring or withholding evidence, and that doing so is only acceptable when there is sufficient reason to think that the agent does have a chance at success. Our friends are not doing us any favors in having us believe that we can run a marathon in under three hours if we can barely break ten minutes in the mile. Most of us care about having an accurate picture of the world and not wasting our time by setting ends for ourselves that are impossible. However, they do cast doubt on the conclusion that we are permitted to engage in positive spin only if we ourselves believe the conclusion we are urging upon our friend.

Moreover, there are respects in which viewing our friends' prospects in an optimistic light and being resilient against evidence to the contrary can do them a disservice. The idea that we should all reason in the just the same way in these cases ignores the value of dividing the epistemic labor among the members of a social group. As difficult as it is to disagree with our loved ones, it is also important to have access to the alternative perspectives they can provide – especially when the agent is prone to being overconfident rather than underconfident. This kind of agent will be benefitted most by a good dose of pessimism, leading her to take stock and deal with the obstacles in her way. We also depend on others to make it safer for us to fail, as it were. The agent herself must orient her reasoning primarily toward accomplishing her goal, since she is the one who must persevere if she is to succeed. But those around her can manifest concern for her well-being by being closely attuned to the evidence that she may not succeed. Relatively pessimistic expectations may focus our attention on doing what we can to ensure that alternative opportunities remain open to the agent; to find ways to make her setbacks less painful for her; to encourage her to develop a healthy attitude toward the relative unimportance of success, and so forth. It may be in her best interest that we never directly share our pessimism with her, but having less-than-optimistic evidential policies concerning her endeavors can be a way of being a good friend, mentor, or parent.

This investigation is far from exhaustive, but we tentatively conclude that a concern for the well-being of our significant others does not univocally push in one direction. It seems to us that it is *permissible* to be the kind of friend or mentor that is genuinely optimistic, and *also* permissible to be the kind that aims to be as clear-eyed and responsive to the warning signs as possible. In fact, the ideal social context for aspiration might be one that includes

both kinds. We need allies who genuinely share our perspective on the world, but we also need allies whose priority is to protect us from what we cannot as easily see.

IV. *Conclusion*

The upshot of our discussion is fairly modest. The initial question was “should our relationship with A shape our beliefs about whether A will succeed at his or her ends?” Our view, defended here and in other work, is that it matters whether A is oneself. Whether or not the capacity for grit is beneficial to have depends partly on the agent’s context, but in circumstances where it is beneficial, our theoretical reasoning should be shaped to a limited extent in ways that promote resilience. Here, we have argued that it is permissible to extend this optimistic reasoning style to one’s significant others, but not required. We do not generally wrong our friends, mentees, colleagues, patients or children by drawing more pessimistic conclusions from the evidence than they do, or than we are epistemically permitted to do. The exception to this concerns the sincerity of their commitments: we have suggested that we can wrong them in doubting that they are as committed to the end as they take themselves to be, if we lack significant and specific evidence that this is so. To doubt their capacity to set ends for themselves can strain the relationship because it amounts to questioning their identity as rational agents, and thus their capability of participating in equal interpersonal relationships. But participating in equal and respectful relationships does not require specific abilities like long-distance running or dissertation-writing, and so this Strawsonian point does not tell against skepticism that they will actually achieve their ends.²⁹

Our interest has been in the possibility of epistemic partiality that does not depend on the claim that we have practical obligations to believe against the evidence.³⁰ We have not specifically argued that we have no such practical obligations, however. Nor have we argued against the possibility that other attitudes like faith or hope might be required in these contexts, or that we might be obliged simply to suspend judgment altogether. Our own view is that action should be guided by belief, and that to the extent that we cannot avoid acting in these circumstances, we also cannot avoid committing ourselves doxastically. But these topics deserve more discussion than we can give them here.

Finally, a more general upshot of the discussion is that the capacity for agency is often socially embedded. Many of the things we do “individually” would be much more difficult, if not impossible, without the influence of those around us. The point is not just that we often engage in “shared agency,” by doing things together. It is also that the capacity to stick

²⁹ Although it might require more general confidence that the other will *eventually* negotiate a path in life and an articulation of her goals that is a good fit with her values, abilities, and opportunities. Indeed, this might be a better interpretation of what we mean when we say we “believe in” someone. Thanks to Peter Railton for a suggestion in this vein.

³⁰ It is worth noting that we have also avoided appeal to any “state-given reasons” provided by our relationships. Crawford (2017) argues that friendship constitutively requires having attitudes toward our friends that are responsive only to object-given reasons and not state-given reasons.

with a project is often mediated by others, not only in the effects of their actions, but in the very attitudes they hold toward you and what you aspire to do. Whether you are able to see your own perseverance as reasonable and admirable rather than pigheaded and hopeless depends in part on how others see it. This point will hardly come as a surprise, but it does perhaps recommend a shift in what the philosophy of action takes to be the central case in our theorizing.

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